

IS THE LABOUR PARTY A SOCIALIST PARTY?

The current Labour Party holds a belief some elements of socialism, but the party hold more anti-socialist beliefs. Overall, they are more anti-socialist, with a few elements of socialism.

Socialism's key features are equality, which is followed by the Labour government to a certain extent, but there is a lot of inequality in their policies. Part of the equality element of socialism is the redistribution of income and wealth, which used to be followed by the Labour Party, but now the party believes that the creation of an economy in which all can benefit is more effective. Another element of equality is a classless society, but Britain is still conscious of class. The Labour party is mostly made up of middle-class members, with only 15% of its members coming from a working-class background. The Labour party supports self-reliance and individual opportunity, which disagrees with the socialist view that capitalism results in injustice, and also disagrees with the belief of redistribution of income and wealth.

Socialism believes in common ownership, which has always traditionally been a Labour principle, but recently, since they gained power in 1997, they have suggested part privatisation and full privatisation of some of the main public services, such as health, education and the tube system in London.

Since gaining leadership in 1997, the party has not pledged to nationalise any of the industries privatised by the Conservative governments, which is something that a socialist party would have certainly done. The current Labour government has also failed to raise income taxes since being in power. They have also failed to depart from the spending plans of previous governments. It has courted the middle class, the City and industry, and has almost disowned the trade union movement, a movement that was such a strong part of the old, very socialist Labour party.

The Labour party has succeeded in keeping and holding two main features of Socialism, which are cooperation and community, where the party's central policy has always been the creation of better living and working conditions via better health care, social security and through other state services. This is still the case today. The Labour party of the 1990s believes that the fulfilment of individual potential can only be fully realised within a strong and cohesive community. It believes in the provision of good public services, high quality health care and education and in the security of safe, crime-free streets.

The Labour party has also succeeded in holding a main feature of socialism, which is internationalism, the Labour party is still against aggressive nationalism and xenophobia, as one would expect from any government in Britain in recent years. The idea of equal opportunities is strongly supported by the Labour party.

If the Labour party was still a socialist party, the Socialist Labour party, a party in which Arthur Scargill (former Union leader) is very actively involved, would not exist. There would also be no need for the Socialist Worker Party if the Labour party was still as socialist and represented the working class of Britain.

The Labour party has gradually shifted away from socialist principles and policies since the 1950s. This slow and gradual shift has meant that the idea of social democracy has become more accepted and more important to the Labour party. This idea involves more of an acceptance of the capitalist economic system, never before accepted by Labour as a socialist party, as socialism believes that capitalism results in

injustice. The idea of social democracy also involved a main principle of socialism itself in that it encouraged the state to redistribute income from the rich to the poor. The gradual shift away from socialist principles continued with the introduction of 'New Labour', under Tony Blair (sometimes referred to as 'Blairism'), where the need for redistribution is not accepted and not so necessary. For example, Clause IV was abolished and then changed to suit 'new' Labour's policies in 1995. The old Clause IV strongly emphasised the idea of common and public ownership, but this idea is not mentioned in the new, updated Clause IV. The new Clause IV stresses the role of community rather than individualism, and it also stresses that power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many and not of the few. There should be a dynamic economy serving public interest and a thriving private sector and good services.

Labour is not currently committed to socialism, and many argue that the Labour has never entirely been committed to socialism. They are now tolerant to capitalism, an idea not supported by the concept of socialism. The Labour party have largely abandoned Trade Union enthusiasm, which was always a strong characteristic of the old Labour party. The party is no longer the party of the underprivileged and working-class, and the members of the party, especially its MPs are mostly Middle-class, often barristers or other professional occupations before the political career began. Many of the Labour MPs were educated at top schools, many of which are private, and many of the MPs send their children to private schools and top schools, which is very different to the traditionally characteristics of the Labour MPs of the early 1900s when the Labour party was relatively new.

The party has transformed from being a party that was to the left, and is more a party of the centre today. There are increasingly more right-wing Labour politicians, and a smaller number of left-wing politicians than the party has traditionally had. The party is generally shifting to the right, which could be a reason to their recent success. Usually the UK is a nation that usually votes for a Conservative government, and very occasionally for a Labour government, said John Ramsden once, but the reason for Labour's recent success and consecutive landslides could be that they are shifting more to the right and they are adopting some Conservative policies and principles, which are usually the reason behind the success of the Conservative party.

The Labour party, although they haven't increased the income tax for the wealthy (a socialist belief), have increased taxation of a number of other things, which have enabled the government to spend more on the welfare system. The party has still got a few connections with the Trade Unions, and is funded in part by the Trade Unions, although the link and connection is much weaker than it previously was. The Labour party has largely supported and held the socialist idea of internationalism by joining the EU and signing the social charter of the EU. The party is now rumoured to be very keen and interested in joining the single European currency, which is another sign of its support of internationalism.

There was no mention of socialism in Labour's latest general election manifesto (2001), whereas it was the main point of their 1945 manifesto where the Labour party stated that "The Labour Party is a socialist party and proud of it. Its ultimate purpose is the establishment of the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain." There is a huge contrast between two manifestos of the same party, with only fifty-six years between the two manifestos. The party has shifted gradually during this period away from socialist ideas in general, despite holding a few of the principles of socialism.

The Labour party still claim that they are a 'democratic socialist party', which believes that 'by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone'. The party claims that its policy is to develop a society 'where we live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect and a society where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe'. This policy encourages capitalism a lot more than socialism does. There is no mention of socialist beliefs such as public ownership. It does however encourage cooperation and community, and encourage people to show compassion and solidarity, which is a main feature of socialism. The Labour party also quote one of their current main values to be social justice, which is a key feature of socialism, whilst also quoting one of their values to be to be rewarded for hard work, which supports socialism to a certain extent that it supports workers rights, but too much work, deliberately done for reward, can lead to a lot of capitalism, which is opposed by socialism, and therefore it can go against the principles of socialism, whilst supporting them. The labour party says that as a democratic socialist party, they welcome people from 'all walks of life' to be members, but most of their current members are from a middle-class background.

The party have included some socialist policies since 1997, such as increasing spending on the NHS, which encourages public ownership. Also, they have reduced the tax burden to the lowest for a working family since 1972, which is the start of redistribution of income to the less fortunate, but they have not followed up this action by redistributing from the rich, as they have reduced the basic rate of income tax, which implies a reduction in the higher rate of income tax.

The Labour party claim that they are socially democratic, but they show to be more in favour of the idea of communitarianism. They are now more in favour of private ownership as supposed to public ownership. They have shifted from the idea of social justice in many ways to social mobility, although they do show many ideas of social justice. They are more in favour of enterprise instead of redistribution. They prefer the idea of civic or political rights rather than their previous idea of social rights. They are becoming less working class, and more middle class, however they are doing so in a more classless Britain, sometimes referred to as 'Middle England'.

An issue that is often argued is the question of how relevant socialism is in today's society. There was a decline of socialist parties and social democratic parties across Western Europe in the 1980s, followed by a collapse in communist East European states in the late 1980s. The market has been more successful and indeed more popular through capitalism since the 1980s. The working class has decreased in size. Anyone now has the opportunity and potential to be educated to the highest level and gain professional jobs, through equal opportunities, so there is a decrease in the amount of working class and poor in Britain. Greater equality can be achieved through welfare capitalism. However, there are many doubts about capitalism, it has gone into crisis in the Far East, and there are fears of a global recession. Even though the number of working class citizens has decreased, there can still be wider equality through socialism. There are still several jobs that are low paid and therefore work is essential to people's lifestyles and still a feature of life.

The real start to Labour's shift from left to centre, and continuously moving towards the right began with the election of Neil Kinnock as leader in 1983. The Labour party began to recover from the convulsions of the early 1980s which had seen it shift towards the left, and it began to move back towards the centre ground of politics. Kinnock moved the Party towards the Conservative-set agenda, with no more talk of nationalisation or unilateral nuclear disarmament. Labour would become enthusiastic Europeans and adopt a new approach through which capitalism was to be

managed. This process gave rise to a division within the party between those who believed in the Kinnock reforms and wished to see further reforms, often referred as the modernisers, and those who wanted only limited reform and the preservation of many traditional ideas, the traditionalists. The Kinnock reforms and policy review did not prove to be enough to win Labour the 1992 General Elections. Tony Blair has kept up Neil Kinnock's ideas to shift further to the right, and it has proved to be a success, after two consecutive landslide victories in general elections, after moving away from some of the elements of socialism.

Sources: UK Government & Politics (Williams); Government & Politics (Selby); Politics UK; www.labour.org.uk